

Dear Beatrice



Recently, you asked my advice on how to compose a mystery. Here, then, is an outline of my method. I have broken everything down, and explained it to the best of my ability. I hope you will find it benefits you.

I focus on murders, as they are the staple of the genre, but the same general rules should apply to a mystery of nearly any type.

Understanding some of the details below requires an understanding of the core rules of *Detectives & Duty*, so be certain that you are familiar with those rules when you read through.

The Role of the Author

You might think that your role as an author is to confuse, mislead, and mystify your detectives, to provide them with clever puzzles they can confront and overcome.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth! Your detectives do not need you to bring in additional confusion. They will waste no time in confusing themselves, and they will do so over every minor detail. Instead, your role is to provide *clarity*, and help your detectives by ensuring that they have everything they need to crack the case.

Yudkowsky, in discussing [how to write mystery in fiction](#), explains the idea especially well:

"This leads me to present you with my New Improved Recipe for how to build mysteries, clues, and hints into your story.

First, know some really important and plot-determining background facts that your viewpoint characters won't know and that the text is not going to state explicitly until the end of the story.

Then make absolutely no effort at all to conceal these facts. Absolutely do not leave false trails for the reader, besides any misdirection that antagonists may realistically employ to deceive protagonists. Don't try to obscure hints and clues that you think are too explicit. Don't worry about the reader figuring things out too early. Just let the facts cast whatever blatant huge shadows they want, so long as the story doesn't literally, explicitly blurt out the actual truth right there in the text.

Thanks to the illusion of transparency, these background facts will be far harder to deduce than you are thinking, and they will become the mysteries that your more attentive readers ponder in the course of reading the story."

So try to spend very little time thinking, "will this surprise and amaze the players?" or "is this tricky enough?" Instead, I encourage you to spend time asking yourself, "is this solvable at all?" and "what are some ways my detectives could get confused?" They will become confused in every way you predict, and in many ways you do not. As a result, you should plan to have certain types of redundancy ready.

When writing a mystery, keep somewhat in mind how many people might be working together to solve the case. A small group, or a single detective working alone, is likely to confuse themselves deeply. In cases like this, you should be especially concerned about establishing clarity. Once four or five people are working together, however, they get much better at correcting for one another's digressions and misinterpretations, and you can present slightly more raw material. Even in this case, however, I recommend including nothing *intended* to mislead, except insofar as the mystery might contain characters who would themselves try to mislead the detectives.

This is actually one of the great blessings of the genre, though few recognize it. Simply lay out the story of an interesting crime, and it will make an excellent mystery, as long as you ensure that finding the truth is not impossible.

An Interesting Story

Your actual role, then, is to present an interesting story, which will engage the detectives in its unraveling.

To tell an interesting story, start by finding a story that is interesting to you.

The story does not have to be complicated. In fact, I would say that a simpler story is almost always better, in accordance with the rule above. The story just has to be interesting, to be compelling, to inspire some curiosity. Even a simple robbery can make an interesting story if we think of the participants as people, rather than just as stock characters. Who were these individuals, criminal and victim? Where do they live? What were the circumstances that drove them together? It does not have to be high drama — it just has to be something that *you* find engaging. Almost everything else will follow naturally from this.

Some authors try to write good mysteries by coming up with a strange clue, a captivating scene, an original quirk, or some other element that will drive the plot. I do not believe that this method is effective; if the story is not interesting at its core, the inclusion of some clever detail cannot save it.

Now, sometimes you will think of an artful clue and will end up with an interesting story that grows out of it. But this is not a reliable way of coming up with a mystery. Admittedly, there is *no* reliable method, but trying to build a case out of a single clue or single scene will usually give you a great deal of grief, and you will often end up with nothing to show for it, so it is an approach I want to warn you against.

Three Principles

There are three principles of utmost importance in writing a mystery, which I elevate above all others. These are the principles that detectives should use to solve mysteries, and so they are also the principles you should use in writing mysteries.

Cui Bono

Cui Bono is a Latin phrase asking, "Who benefits?"

In considering a crime, we should assume that the perpetrator got something that they wanted, or at least that they tried to. When solving a crime, we should ask who would benefit (materially or otherwise) from what was done, or what was attempted. When writing a mystery, then, the author should keenly be aware of what the criminal wanted, and how they expected to benefit.

This is especially critical because no crime comes without risks, and perpetrators will naturally be aware of this. If they decide to commit a crime, it is because they think that getting what they want is *worth* the chance of getting caught. In general, people only commit crimes when they have a great desire they cannot satisfy in any other way, or when they have little to lose from taking the risk.

Even in the case of a crime of passion, this rule still tends to hold in part. A drunk will wait to stab his rival until he's in the alley out back, rather than killing him immediately in the tavern when insulted.

To make a case more or less difficult, you can adjust how many people would potentially benefit from the victim's death. Making the victim rude, cruel, or competitive, giving them many heirs, or giving them extreme and unpopular political beliefs will make it harder and harder to figure out which of their many enemies was the one to finally do them in. If the victim was a total pleasure to be around, gracious and generous to all (or perhaps a total hermit), then once the detectives have found one suspect who might benefit from the murder, they have probably found their killer.

An interesting and most beneficial side effect of this principle is that it rules out some awkward and unusual motives, especially those of madness and certain types of obsession.

Against Madness as Motive

A tempting option for the writer is to consider insanity, or some random obsession (for example, the desire to kill people with the initials E.B.; I'm thinking of the kind of motive found in media like [Se7en](#) or Dan Brown novels), as the motive for a killer. I must strongly caution against it.

The main reason not to use these motives is that they violate *Cui Bono*. Without being able to consider who would benefit from the crime, the detectives are robbed of a major tool for problem-solving, and you are robbed of a major tool for structuring your case.

Remember, even serial killers "benefit" from their murders in some way, though the benefit can be hard to understand from the outside. A serial killer has bizarre and twisted needs, but they do have needs that they are trying to meet, and this provides a structure that the detectives can recognize and use.

To a certain extent, these motives also violate the principle of *Every Time Has a Reason* (see below). An insane killer kills more or less at random. The time of the killings will convey almost no information, which is another problem, since normally the time of death is deeply informative.

If one were to use such a motive, one would have to do extra work to make sure that the case could be solved at all, given that these vital supports are removed. How exactly to compensate, however, is hard to say.

Because of all this, I think such motives are best avoided entirely.

Murder is an Action of Last Resort

Murder is something people generally resort to when they have no other options. If a problem can be solved without murder, then that solution will generally be preferred. Murdering someone is a risky proposition, and even for the capable and daring, it's rarely a good idea.

The exception can be found when murder *itself* is the goal, rather than some secondary effect. There are many ways to get money, to advance your career, to humiliate your rivals, or to protect yourself—but if you want someone dead, you may just have to kill them. This is true even for serial killers. If killing *in itself* is not their grotesque desire, then they will probably avoid murder when they can. If they want to cause pain or feel powerful, they will at least try to slake their thirst for it in a way that is not so dangerous to them. There will be some other exceptions, but generally speaking, murder is only turned to when it is a person's only option (or at least when they think it is).

This also means that murder tends to be an action the powerless use against the powerful. This is simple and evident in the case of, for example, a low-class servant killing her high-class master. Given their relative station, she may have no other recourse against him in a crisis. When *Cui Bono* is not immediately clear, you can start by asking, who did the victim have power over?

This does not always map onto traditional notions of power. In the case of a servant *blackmailing* her master, power runs counter to what we would expect. The master is powerless to stop his servant from exposing him, and murdering her may be the only thing he can do to stop her. Therefore in some cases, the detectives may need to figure out what the power dynamics at play are before they can make much progress on the motive. As a writer, you can make a case more interesting by making the power dynamics more complicated, or concealing the details of who has power over whom.

A rich noble might be able to get away with murder, to be sure. But a coverup is tricky and expensive, and even if they escape any legal consequences, details that get out might prove embarrassing. Even the very powerful will generally avoid murder when they have other means of achieving their goals.

Every Time Has a Reason

Murders (and other crimes) don't occur at a random point in time; they occur at their own time. They occur when they do because something has changed. A crime of passion is a trivial case of this rule, but consider a question like this — "He's lived and worked here 10 years. What was different about today that led to him getting killed?" If you try to understand why a murder happened when it did, you will generally come to learn what caused it.

If all the elements needed for the murder existed last month, then the murder would have occurred then. Therefore, we can conclude that all the elements did not exist last month. What has changed to make the murder possible now?

If a murder was premeditated, then the killer chose that moment for a reason. It afforded them something, was convenient or helpful in some way that no other time was. If a murder was not premeditated, then it was likely the result of factors coming together at that very time. Loans were called in, some unpleasant truth was learned, a chance meeting introduced two parties. What random changes conspired to bring about the crime at exactly this moment?

Consider the *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* case, "The Tin Soldier". In this case, the murder was a direct consequence of a French play coming to town. One of the actors had an old grudge against an Englishman, and being in London gave him a chance to finally take revenge. Opportunity makes murder possible.

When solving a mystery, the detectives should consider why the crime happened when it did, rather than happening at some other time. When writing a mystery, the author should pay close attention to the timeline, and understand why things came to a head at exactly the moment they did.

Every Contact Leaves a Trace

The most important tool in writing the details of a mystery is [Locard's exchange principle](#):

"Wherever he steps, whatever he touches, whatever he leaves, even unconsciously, will serve as a silent witness against him. Not only his fingerprints or his footprints, but his hair, the fibers from his clothes, the glass he breaks, the tool mark he leaves, the paint he scratches, the blood or semen he deposits or collects. All of these and more, bear mute witness against him. This is evidence that does not forget. It is not confused by the excitement of the moment. It is not absent because human witnesses are. It is factual evidence. Physical evidence cannot be wrong, it cannot perjure itself, it cannot be wholly absent. Only human failure to find it, study and understand it, can diminish its value."

This principle has solved many crimes in real life. For example:

"In Warwick 1816, a farm laborer was tried and convicted of the murder of a young maidservant. She had been drowned in a shallow pool and bore the marks of violent assault. The police found footprints and an impression from corduroy cloth with a sewn patch in the damp earth near the pool. There were also scattered grains of wheat and chaff. The breeches of a farm labourer who had been threshing wheat nearby were examined and corresponded exactly to the impression in the earth near the pool."

Locard's Principle also comes in handy because it helps the author avoid the tiresome parade of clichés common to the genre. Even if one is aware of their overuse, one will find footprints, left-handedness, and preferred brand of cigarette popping up over and over again as clues to a murderer's identity! While many crime scenes will reasonably include things like footprints, they quickly become tiresome when every case hinges upon them. Let's see if we can't do better.

To use this technique, simply write out everything that happened during the crime. Then, for each occurrence, determine one or two traces that it would leave, and include those as evidence that can be found at the scene.

Try to come up with lots of details, and don't be afraid to make them slightly unusual. Visualize where the events occurred. Is the canal to the left or the right of the street? Are the conditions icy, wet, hot, foggy? Did the victim hear their attacker coming? Did the first blow land true? Knowing exactly how the crime played out will give you lots of traces, which you can leave as clues. Most clues will be irrelevant to solving the case, but together they will paint a picture.

One way to dial up the difficulty of a case is to set a critical section in an area where traces quickly decay. A crime scene on a frequently-traveled road, a body that washed up on the shore of a river, or a murder-suicide on a windswept mountain peak during a snowstorm are all instances where important traces will be muddled or lost. Of course, this makes your job more difficult as well, so *caveat scriptor*.

Criminal Counterintelligence

Locard's Principle interacts in an interesting way with the intelligence and expertise of a criminal, and how much planning they were able to do. This provides room for a set of meta-clues about the criminal's character, their experience committing crimes, and the amount of premeditation involved.

The dull or novice criminal leaves a scene full of traces, so that the entirety of what occurred can be observed, and proper deductions drawn. Only the least prepared will attempt no coverup at all, but a criminal of this rank will cover their tracks poorly at best, overlooking many incriminating details.

The clever or experienced criminal attempts to cloud the scene with false leads. In S1E1 of *Elementary*, Sherlock discovers that the front door was kicked in *after* the murder, to make the killing appear to be the result of a random break-in by a stranger. In fact, the victim knew the killer, and willingly let them into the apartment. But Locard's Principle tells us that false clues can always be found to be false ("*it cannot perjure itself*"). Sherlock discovers blood in the footprint on the door, which shows that it must have been kicked in after the murder, rather than before. When all evidence is preserved, the true story can always be discerned. Consider also that more information may be unwittingly revealed when a false clue is planted. In *A Study in Scarlet*, the false clue (*RACHE* written in blood on the wall) reveals the murderer's height and the length of his nails. He would have been better off not attempting this misdirection!

The truly intelligent criminal is aware that any attempt to poison the well with false leads risks leaving additional traces, so this criminal *destroys* evidence instead. Evidence which is destroyed can never be recovered, so its removal poses a serious threat to the investigation. The only remaining hope is this simple fact: no one can destroy the entirety of the evidence, and something will remain ("*it cannot be wholly absent*"). If the investigators can find the remaining evidence, they may still be able to re-construct what occurred.

Of course, even the most brilliant criminal cannot anticipate everything.

Mistakes

No crime goes exactly according to plan; this is the only guarantee. While your perpetrator may be more or less successful, it is reasonable to assume that they encountered at least one wrinkle. This should be reflected somewhere in the evidence, as per Locard's Principle. No criminal, however smart, can anticipate every detail of what will happen.

We could consider two kinds of mistakes. The first is something happening, or the inclusion of some detail, which the murderer did not expect. The victim might have a friend over that night. The murder weapon might break at a critical moment. The door might open out rather than opening in. The gardener might wander in and interrupt the whole thing. One way or another, something will go wrong.

The second kind of mistake is the mistake of overlooking something incriminating. A handy way to come up with these mistakes is to put yourself in the perpetrator's shoes. If *you* were committing this crime, what are some ways you would be concerned that you might get caught? How might you accidentally give yourself away and be discovered? What steps would you take to ensure that you would not fall under suspicion?

Write out a list of at least three or four ways you would worry that the police might be able to find you out. Then, come up with ways of covering up most of them, but have the perpetrator "forget" or otherwise fail to account for one of the ways they might be discovered, allowing the detectives to get on their trail.

This is also nice because it allows you to scale the scenario to fit the perpetrator's level of intelligence. A very canny murderer will anticipate many ways they could potentially be discovered, and will do their best to account for all of them. Since any criminal will be concerned with being caught, a conspicuous *lack* of covering one's trail suggests an unusually rushed or rather stupid criminal. This can add additional realism and be a meta-clue in itself, indicating something about the criminal's intelligence and the planning they put into the crime.

Structure

Having discussed the theory of mystery, we can think a little bit about how to structure an actual case.

In my system, I break stories up into different components. Generally, there will be multiple *areas* worth investigating, each area will consist of one or more *locations*, and each location will contain some *evidence*.

See the core rules in the main *Detectives & Duty* document for in-depth discussion of the underlying mechanics. Here, I will outline a little more about what goes into writing the details.

Depth and Breadth

Insofar as murders are viewed as mystery, difficulty and time can be increased by depth or breadth. A useful way to think of the mystery is in layers; each layer requires certain observations, investigations, and deductions. This will unlock layers beneath, until a full report of evidence is found at the bottom.

Depth refers to the number of layers. Depth will make a mystery longer, but not always more challenging. It is more simple than breadth. In isolation, depth is simply a trail of breadcrumbs — a dead man will lead to his apartment, his apartment to his job, his job to a motive, and a motive to a killer. Depth alone has certain limitations. If a single layer is not clear enough, the trail is entirely lost. Little decision-making is required on the part of the detectives, and the clues will too often lead them by the nose. At a high level, you could have a single path with multiple realizations. For example, a corpse's identity could easily lead to her home or her profession; but in including these branches, we are already approaching breadth.

Breadth refers to the number of branches. Certainly these do not need to be organized in the same layers, but it seems reasonable to think of each branch as having depth. It is possible to conduct a case entirely in breadth, with no depth. Consider the *Consulting Detective* mysteries. In each, we are presented with a murder, and immediately a number of motives (usually three) are implied, each suggesting their own branch. This breadth is somewhat illusory, however. If the crime scene is well-designed, good deduction will quickly be able to rule out all options but one.

Breadth has a number of limitations — most notably, red herrings, and any other trail that leads nowhere. These are effectively filler, and I think they are only permissible when the detectives should be able to infer that the trail is cold in that direction — in which case, there is effectively no breadth at all! Instead, if you include many branches, each branch should have its own benefits. For example, means, motive, and opportunity might each occupy their own branch, with perhaps a red herring branch (which they should quickly be able to rule out) for a distraction.

My other complaint with breadth is its limitations from logic and material. A very broad story can get immense and sickeningly complex. In truth, combination is the path to success. Sun Tzu said,

There are not more than five musical notes, yet the combinations of these five give rise to more melodies than can ever be heard.

There are not more than five primary colors (blue, yellow, red, white, and black), yet in combination they produce more hues than can ever been seen.

There are not more than five cardinal tastes (sour, acrid, salt, sweet, bitter), yet combinations of them yield more flavors than can ever be tasted.

In battle, there are not more than two methods of attack - the direct and the indirect; yet these two in combination give rise to an endless series of maneuvers.

The direct and the indirect lead on to each other in turn. It is like moving in a circle - you never come to an end. Who can exhaust the possibilities of their combination?

Consider an example form, which I will call the 1-3-3-1. In this case, one scenario suggests three branches. Evidence at a murder scene might point to the victim's apartment, their place of work, and a local tavern. Investigation of each branch suggests a single logical followup. Each followup points to the evidence which will incriminate the killer. Perhaps their apartment contains evidence that they were short on money, their address book and calendar can be found at their office, and the local tavern will reveal the

name of someone they got into a confrontation with. There is a great deal of choice; the detectives have six places to fail without direct consequence, and three paths by which they can succeed.

Drawing out the layers and connections may be useful. Even if you don't literally make a diagram, try to keep the structure clear in your head. Personally I do not make actual diagrams, but my case files are strictly organized into layers, and this serves much the same purpose.

Red Herrings

While red herrings are a hallmark of the genre, when writing a true mystery I think they are a weak tool at best. I don't want to suggest that they are useless, but they introduce a major problem. Red herrings make it so that even a very intelligent group of detectives, who do absolutely everything right, can still waste huge amounts of time on dead ends. This is frustrating to the detectives and unfair to the principles of the genre. If care and intelligence do not lead to a faster and more elegant solution, then it's a story *about* a murder, not an actual mystery.

Inclusion of red herrings is acceptable only when a competent detective can rule them out early on. Either the route is precluded from the very start (e.g. the suspect is just too short to match the footprints) or can be eliminated early on by the proper line of inquiry (e.g. upon questioning, we learn that the suspect is left-handed, so she couldn't have inflicted those wounds). Otherwise your detectives will be unable, no matter their cleverness, to make informed decisions. They will be reduced to guessing at random, which doesn't serve the game, and is uninteresting for everyone involved.

Areas

Most crimes will involve evidence in more than one place. A murder in the forest will lead the detectives to a secluded cabin, to the victim's spouse at their place of business, and to the estate of the noble who owns the land. Each of these is an area, separated by a need for travel over a reasonable distance.

Location

Locations function as different game objects within an area. Each one has its own set of evidence and each of them are investigated separately by perception checks.

In a large house, there might be three locations; upstairs, downstairs, and in the back yard. A ship might have an abovedecks location and a belowdecks location, and maybe a separate location for the bilge or an important cabin. A crime scene on a country road might have the road itself, the forest on one side, and the stream on the other as its locations.

Always be explicit with your players about what the different locations are. I usually tell them something like, "There are three locations here; the clearing is one game object and both cabins are their own game objects." They should have a very good idea of what they are working with, especially since they are required to explicitly declare when they choose to actively perceive.

Often in a murder, the body is its own "location". It deserves special attention, so I choose to handle it as a game object in its own right. Other very important objects or aspects of a scene could get similar treatment. An abandoned carriage, an ornate and locked chest, or a bookshelf stuffed with rare tomes and curios might also be treated as their own locations in game terms.

Important areas should have multiple locations. This is important because of how the system works. If one detective rolls high in a particular location, they are likely to entirely clear that location of clues. This is unfair to the other detectives, who will not get the chance to find any clues at all. Breaking up an area into multiple locations allows the evidence to unfold in a more dynamic way, and prevents any of the most boring patterns of results. If there is one location, it is boring if the detectives roll high and find everything, but also boring if they all roll low and find nothing. Much more interesting if they find everything in the basement but overlook everything in the garden.

This is also helpful because it can help keep the detectives from meta-gaming. One question the detectives should always be considering is whether they should return to a location to search it again, in case they have overlooked any clues. If there is only one location, and they find very little, they can reasonably assume that they have missed the important clues, which makes it trivially clear that they should search the area again. But if there are multiple locations in an area, it is possible that some locations really will contain only a few clues, so when they find very little in the alleyway, it's not a dead giveaway that they've overlooked something. This keeps the detectives in the right mindset, thinking deeply about their choices and engaging with the evidence at hand, rather than speculating about the format of the case and design decisions of the writer.

For this reason, too, I often will intentionally include a location or two that contains no important clues.

Evidence

Some small amount of evidence will be clear to anyone who walks into a location. This should simply be given to the detectives when they enter a scene.

Anything that would require active search requires a check. When deciding what the DCs should be, pay some heed to realism. Some clues will just be much harder to notice than others. Overall, however, the DCs should serve the format of the case. They should make it engaging, but not impossible, to solve.

You should adjust these criteria to take the number of detectives and their skill level into consideration, but here are the guidelines I would suggest:

Details with DCs of under 10 are basically freebees for whoever looks at the scene first, but things that are not immediately evident just from looking at the scene. These include things like going through a corpse's pockets, examining their wounds, or just investigating various objects in the area.

Details with DCs of under 20 are the main corpus of evidence at a location. This is what you want the detectives to walk away with. The most important clues should generally be in this range. Most of the time, the detectives should be able to solve the case with this evidence alone.

Details with DCs of 20 or above are things that only a master would find on the first pass. But these are also things that a team of grunts, given enough time, will eventually reveal. Someone will roll that 19 or 20. Critical clues should rarely be placed in this range, though there will on occasion be reason to do so. If you can reasonably expect that the detectives will search an area multiple times, having a few clues in this

range is a good idea, so that they will have something to find on their second or third pass. This is also a good place for clues that hint at additional flavor, though again, keep in mind that the detectives may never see them.

I like to give a few pieces of evidence that are "stretch goals", with DCs of 25 or higher, at crucial locations. Since detectives are by no means expected to find any of these, they should be "bonus" evidence rather than evidence necessary for solving the case. These long-shot pieces of evidence should either corroborate a piece of more obvious evidence, or should provide a shortcut for the detectives. A shortcut might help to close off a line of inquiry, or it might help disambiguate an earlier clue which could be interpreted in multiple ways. This is a good way to reward a high roll, and it provides some luck, often exactly when luck is needed. (And if they're totally desperate, they can always go back and beat their heads against the critical locations until they find these clues.) Just make sure that none of these clues are so rewarding that finding them will resolve the case immediately!

Clues Addendum

Locard's Principle will provide most of the evidence in a well-written mystery. But occasionally you will want to add flair, or additional information, or close off a line of reasoning which you suspect will distract your detectives. In these cases, you may choose to add clues "by hand".

Clues deliberately planted can have a number of uses. Here are a few of them:

1. They may usefully point to a person directly, by something particular to them, e.g. their name or an unusual profession.
2. They may point towards a person by that person's attributes, and help paint a portrait of them, e.g. height or hair color.
3. They may rule out a person by demonstrating an impossibility. If the murderer climbed something, the suspect with the bad leg probably didn't do it.
4. They may point towards a new location, or person who has further clues. Stick a theatre ticket in their pocket.
5. They may be a total blind; curious but useless. This is an excellent way to include flavor, and sifting useful from useless evidence is a good warmup for your detectives. It's not usually very tricky, but it requires they do a little thinking before they are able to get on to the real meat of the case.

More important than the clues themselves is how clues are presented. If a clue is face-value useful (a monogrammed handkerchief) it is extremely boring, but if it requires deduction (arrival by carriage suggests the murderer is a carriage-driver) it is both a challenge and interesting.

Actual Writing

In writing a mystery, then, make use of the principles above.

Mysteries are by their nature highly connected, and so there is no formula for it. Nor would we want our mysteries to be formulaic. But if I were to propose a pattern, it would run something like this:

1. Think of an interesting crime; a story that is interesting to you.
2. Consider the perpetrator's motive. What did they hope to gain? Why was it worth it for them to take the risk of committing a crime? Why did they not solve their problem some other way? (Indeed, perhaps they tried.)
3. Consider when the crime might occur. What changed the circumstances enough to make the time right? If you were committing this crime, what sort of opportunity would you wait for?
4. Consider how the perpetrator would plan to commit the crime and get away with it. Which trails will they cover up? Which will they forget to deal with?
5. Come up with at least one wrinkle or mistake, something that the perpetrator did not expect. Determine how that changes what they planned to do. For additional fun, add more than one mistake.
6. Write out a timeline of what happened, and use Locard's Principle to leave at least one clue for every event. Not every clue has to be interpretable, but anything that occurred should leave some sort of trace. Err on the side of including too much information rather than too little. Every single step should leave something to find.
7. Write material for all loose ends that your detectives might want to follow. Make sure you know a little about every minor character you mention and everything the detectives might see as a lead. If you mention the victim's red socks, have some idea about where the socks come from! You never know what they will want to follow up on.
8. Review your case. Ask the following questions:
 - Do the detectives have what they need to solve the crime?
 - How might they get confused? What clues might yield multiple interpretations?
 - If they get stuck on one clue or one branch of the story, do they have other options for pursuing the truth?
9. Finally, ensure that nothing has been rendered illogical or confusing by the changes you have made in going through this process.
10. Write down one or two ways that a perfect detective could solve the mystery, using only the information available at each step. This will help you make sure that there are no weak links. If you notice any weak links, go back and give the detectives extra hints to point them in the right direction.

Running the Game

Finally, a little advice on running the mystery itself:

- Be prepared to make things up. Your detectives will ask brilliant questions you never considered, and will want to follow up on leads you never noticed you planted. You may need to account for things being related in ways you didn't anticipate.

- On that note, I have written a few short R scripts which I often use during games. They can generate for me 1) random character names, 2) random personalities and quirks, and 3) random physical appearances. Something like this is a good way to get out of binds, and will help you roleplay helpful NPCs in a pinch.
- On the other hand, always feel free to tell them that they can't find something out, or can't manage to follow up on something. Not every clue can be analyzed, not every lead can be traced. "You're unable to tell what kind of glue that is." "You can't find anyone by that name in the directory." Feel free to do this aggressively if they're really trying to go down a path you have not prepared for at all. If they're trying to find the victim's mother's doctor or the manufacturer of the kitchen knife that was used as the murder weapon, maybe you should shut them down.
- It's always a balance between letting your detectives make their own mistakes and saving yourself from having to come up with tons of material on the spot. Personally, I try to keep my detectives focused on areas and topics which I have planned out somewhat, but otherwise I let them make whatever mistakes they want. I feel that the players should succeed or fail on their own, but you should help them have at least a chance to succeed. You could choose to be more or less lenient in this regard, though.
- Give them more information rather than less information. Part of their job is to sift through all the things you tell them. There's no need to be cagey. Throw in a lot of detail.
- Make sure to stick to the facts. Do not interpret things for them. State what they would see, hear, smell, etc., but don't tell them what to make of it. "The paint can is torn open," you might say, but don't add, "probably by that sledgehammer I mentioned earlier, the one with all the paint on it." When they ask questions, try to give them specific answers of how their *character* would see things. "You can't tell..." "You think it seems like..." "You don't recognize..."
- Of course, if the character would know something the player does not, you can step in to provide that information. "That style of doublet is worn by couriers, but they usually have satchels, and you don't see one anywhere." Always provide this information when it is critical to the case, but otherwise err on the side of doing it less often. The players can always ask you if their character would know or recognize something that they do not.
 - (This is a good example of not interpreting! Notice I said, "that style of doublet is worn by couriers," not "he's a courier" or even, "that style of doublet means he's a courier." Be as careful as possible in your wording. Stick to observable facts!)
- Finally, there is a good chance that you'll make a mistake. I have done things like included clues which accidentally implied a contradiction in the timeline, and which made the case nearly impossible to solve. When this happens, if you cannot see a way to naturally clear things up, simply step in and explain your mistake. The detectives should be able to continue on with that in mind.

When Players are Stuck

Personally, I feel that the game is only fun when there is a real chance of failure. It would be terribly boring if the players couldn't win; I think they should also be given an honest chance to lose. This way, their accomplishment is a real accomplishment, not simply a *fait accompli*. If they will succeed no matter what they do, then they did not really solve the mystery, and did not really get to exercise their

intelligence.

One could reasonably disagree on this, and I think it is fine to fall anywhere along the spectrum of this tradeoff, as long as the players are also on board. I have even thought that it might be interesting, with the right players, to intentionally write "impossible" cases and see if they can crack them in ways you didn't anticipate.

(While I didn't mention it earlier, you should keep this relative chance of success and failure in mind as you write your case.)

Still, being stuck isn't much fun. Even if you are comfortable letting your detectives fail, you probably don't want to see them run in circles. Even with your help, they can still fail on their own. Let's at least make it interesting! When players are stuck in a way that seems counterproductive, here are some steps you can take to help them without giving things away:

- If they misinterpreted something factual that you said earlier, feel free to step in with a correction. "Actually, the Duke is his *younger* brother." Don't let them pursue anything based on a misunderstanding of what you said—though if they understood what you said and they *misinterpreted* it, that is more of their own fault, and you should probably let them make that mistake.
- If they are going down a total dead-end path, make it as boring and unrewarding as possible. Slam doors in their face if you have to. I'd recommend letting them pursue dead ends somewhat, in the interest of letting them make their own mistakes, but don't let it get out of hand.
- Some criminals will make the mistake of trying to involve themselves with the case, or keep an eye on the detectives, and can accidentally tip their hand in this way. Only do this if it would be realistic for the criminal to do so, of course. Make sure that if they do tip their hand, it is in a way that is *suggestive* of their guilt, rather than conclusively incriminating.
- Put them into contact with the evidence again. Do what you can to get them back in the area they should be looking at. This could involve:
 - ...inventing a new occurrence at the location, to draw them back.
 - ...having NPCs bring up that location in conversation.
 - ...inserting reminders about that area or those pieces of evidence into new material. If you want them to go back to the docks, maybe the next bar they investigate should have a nautical theme.
- If they have zeroed in on the wrong suspect, and this person is both aware of their scrutiny and at all intelligent, then the suspect can take steps to argue for their own innocence.
- Get them into contact with intelligent NPCs, who you can use as your voice. In this way you can give advice in a realistic manner. On that note, make sure your setting includes some intelligent NPCs they can go to for advice if they need it. Then you can suggest, "Maybe you should check in with so-and-so?"
- Remind them of the core principles of solving a mystery (through an NPC if possible). Specifically:
 - *Cui Bono*
 - Try to get them to speculate about who stood to gain from the crime.
 - Especially if they have the wrong suspect, suggest they consider more deeply what the motive was.
 - Every Time Has a Reason
 - Ask them if they figured out what changed to cause the crime to happen now.

- Recommend that they go over their timeline. How certain are they of every step?
- Every Contact Leaves a Trace
 - Ask them if they know exactly how the crime itself happened. If not, encourage them to go back and look closely at all the evidence.
 - Ask them if there are any clues they don't understand. Why were there all those scuff marks on the back steps? Remind them of such clues if necessary.
 - Remind them that if they know exactly how the crime was committed, they will know almost everything they need to know to solve the case.
- When people are confused, it's usually because one of their assumptions is incorrect. See if you can get them to revisit their assumptions, or get them to consider whether something might be an assumption.
 - Again, if you can get them to talk to an NPC, even a very dull character might be able to say, "Oh, that's surprising, how do you know that?"
- If you are truly desperate, remind them of the *factual* aspects of the case ("Isn't it strange that none of the vases in that apartment were broken?"), but *never* interpret these aspects for them ("~~Doesn't that imply that there wasn't a struggle?~~"). Again, doing this through an NPC is always best, to avoid breaking their immersion.

Unfortunately, there are an infinite number of ways for your detectives to become confused, so this list is not exhaustive. You may have to think on your feet. The most important thing, of course, is to not give anything away explicitly.

George Orwell ended his writing advice with, "Break any of these rules rather than say something outright barbarous." He's got a point. The rules I have presented here all exist to serve the structure of the game and the brilliance of the genre, but no rule can be prepared for every possibility. No rule will be appropriate for every case. Break any of my rules rather than write something outright barbarous.

With this, I have exhausted the advice I can give. My sincere best wishes in your composition of a mystery.

Your affectionate uncle,

Corentin